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What to do about Marcos?

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The recent visit of Sen. Paul Laxalt to Manila, following several trips by American officials [including CIA Chief William Casey] in the last eight months, suggests a growing U.S. apprehension over recent developments in the Philippines.

The American mood is increasingly pessimistic about the ability of President Ferdinand Marcos to remain in control and to arrest the expansion of the New People's Army. A victory by radical forces in the Philippines would mean closure of the two military installations at Clark Air Base and Subic Bay, which the United States needs to maintain its strategic operations and security interests in Asia and the Pacific. Marcos' downfall also would threaten American economic interests in the Philippines amounting to some $1.1 billion.

KAL/The Economist

There are clear signs that if the U.S. continues to support the destructive and corrupt Marcos regime, the Philippines might be the next American foreign policy disaster in the Third World.

At this point, many people are asking: What will the U.S. do? Will it dump Marcos, who has become a liability after having received all-out American support all these years? Who is the U.S. grooming to be his successor?

The U.S. government, of course, will not publicly discuss these sensitive questions, but it is reasonable to assume that it has some plans about the Philippine crisis that can be activated at an appropriate time. There is too much at stake in the Philippines for the U.S. to just sit by.

The present situation recalls a similar time in the Philippines in the early 1950s when the U.S. needed to suppress the communist-led Huk rebellion. Then CIA operative Edward Lansdale carried out a counterinsurgency plan that included military and economic reforms designed to restore the confidence of Filipinos in their government. The key to the success of the plan was then-Defense Secretary Ramon Magsaysay, who was popularized by American public relations techniques as a "Man of the Masses." He won overwhelmingly in the 1953 elections, and was credited with having eliminated the threat of a communist takeover in the country.

The current crisis, however, is vastly different from and much more complex than the one in the '50s. For one thing, there is no new Magsaysay emerging, and the U.S. instead is confronted with various possibilities. The only viable alternative would have been Benigno Aquino, but he was assassinated in 1983. Now there are at least four presidential contenders in the elite opposition, including Aquino's widow.

In the Marcos camp, Imelda Marcos and Gen. Fabian Ver are the powerbrokers, but the U.S. has made no secret of its distaste for both. Other factions in the bureaucracy and military are headed by Defense Minister Juan Ponce Enrile and Gen. Fidel Ramos, the latter reportedly an American favorite to play a major role in the succession scenario. In the military establishment itself, there is a reformist "We Belong" clique, which can figure prominently in the succession struggle.

Through all this web of rumor and speculation, it is difficult to predict whom the U.S. is backing as a successor to Marcos. But even if the U.S. had a clear successor in the wings, the larger problem of how to remove Marcos from the scene remains.

If elections were held now or in the future, assuming Marcos is still alive, he would surely run and win in spite of his universal unpopularity. He has been in power so long that he has mastered the art of perpetuating himself. He only has to direct the military and his hand-picked Commission on Elections to ensure his victory. Surely the Americans must realize that the electoral option is a naive solution if they want to replace Marcos. Elections are meaningless in dictatorships.

The Americans must also know that Marcos will not exit gracefully. Given the nature of the man and his violent political career, he will stay there until he is finished. How to replace Marcos, an old but discredited ally, without destabilizing the whole system is really at the heart of the U.S. dilemma in the Philippines.

In any case, the Laxalt visit was bad news for Marcos, whose political survival has depended in large measure on crucial support from President Reagan, particularly after the Aquino assassination. The cost of supporting Marcos, however, both economically and politically, has risen dramatically, and the U.S. is clearly giving a strong signal of its disenchantment.

For his part, Marcos is caught in a double bind. On the one hand, he has to say his regime is not falling to the communists in order to show the U.S. he is in control. But to get more American aid or support, he has to say the communists, or the Moslems, or the church, are a real threat to Philippine national security. No one believes him anymore and he is running out of scapegoats.

If U.S. aid is withdrawn or diminished, Marcos will become increasingly vulnerable, especially if the Philippine economy continues to deteriorate, the military remains abusive, the cronies are uncontrollable, Gen. Ver is acquitted in the Aquino trial and the various opposition groups wise up and get together. So far, Marcos has weathered challenges to his authoritarian rule, but his options are getting fewer and narrower. And his end cannot be much longer.

The classic phrase about sowing the seeds of one's own destruction applies to Marcos. When he pulled his coup in 1972, he unleashed political forces in Philippine society that would eventually be more powerful than the regime he would put together as his personal dictatorship.

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